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ABSTRACT

In the rehabilitation workshop there is insufficient attention to job development oriented to the current and future needs of industry. Many types of work which were done in vocational workshops in contract from industrial firms are now done by automation. Semiskilled labor is thus in diminished demand. There is a twenty year lag in the industrial image of vocational rehabilitation workshops. They do not reflect the vast technological changes or mirror the way people earn their living. Single workshops lack the resources and capabilities for coping with the situation. What is needed is a unified and coordinated effort to develop a model workshop of the future. A centralized computer and automated business service center could be used to train clients and perform supportive tasks for other facilities. Other processes which could supplement work now being done include microfilming, small appliance repair, electronic circuitry assembly, medical equipment production, plastic extrusion and molding, and precision testing laboratories. Changes must be made so that the disabled may realize their full potential in a changing economic and social order. (MS)

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INVESTIGATING THE TWENTY YEAR LAG

in the

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROCESS

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The workshop in the Rehabilitation Agency provides a setting in which the disabled are encouraged to perform what society deems a "normal" role. In our culture an essential requisite for the fulfillment of this role is the need to work. The value of work is seen not only in its usefulness as a means of individual and familial sustenance, but also for its significance in providing individual self-esteem and in the overall organization of life. (Rothschild, 1970)

There is little need in this paper to review the contributions made by workshops throughout the country to this aspect of the resocialization process of the disabled. The purpose is rather to deal with a particular aspect of the problem that may impede further progress in this vital area of rehabilitation.

There is a widening gap between technologically advancing modes of production in private industry and the type of training and work offered to most consumers of rehabilitation services. Consequently, there is in the workshop setting insufficient attention to job development that is oriented to the needs of industry now and in the future.

A 1970 survey of the job capabilities of 79 workshops in a six state area from New Jersey to West Virginia revealed the following:

62 workshops offered packaging as their main area of service. Of these only one third were equipped with heat-

sealing or blister-packaging equipment. 50 shops were involved in "small assemblies", 45 shops had capabilities in mailing and duplicating services, 23 shops were engaged in salvage, disassembly, repair and reconditioning. Only 14 shops had machine tool capabilities or sewing machine facilities. Four shops offered typing, one shop taught welding, one had engraving equipment, and one plastics and stamping. (Defense Contract Administration Services Region, Philadelphia, 1970). It is safe to assume that this survey of capabilities is fairly representative of what is taking place in most workshops throughout the country.

Most of the tasks at workshops originate from industrial firms in need of supportive services. The work supplied in many instances are residual jobs: minor assemblies, packaging and "nuisance" operations. Often these are too costly, space-consuming or unprofitable to be handled on the premises of the contract-letting company.

The proliferation of the use of off-shore facilities (Japan, Hong Kong, Mexico) has further diminished the possibilities for more sophisticated work (electronics, etc.) that some workshops have been involved in.

Vast changes have taken place in the methods of industrial production. Assemblies that were "choice operations" for training purposes are now automatically put together by computerized equipment. Cable harnessing, so important to many workshops has been automated. Drilling,

boring, de-burring, and dozens of related machine-type skills are accomplished by robot-like devices that perform to fractional tolerances not manageable by human labor.

The most serious consequence of this development for the labor market in general is the diminished need for hand or machine labor, particularly that category designated "semi-skilled". 73 percent of all persons 17 years and over suffering a chronic condition are limited in their ability to work. In the white collar field only 5.3 percent are thus limited. Among blue collar workers and service workers the percentage climbs to 7.2 and 9.8 percent respectively. There is little doubt that most of the clients at agency workshops derive from the blue collar and service categories. (Rothschild, 1970).

A brief review of the experience of one agency, The Federation of the Handicapped in New York City, offers valuable insight. More than twenty years ago the Agency Director embarked on an ambitious program of workshop modernization related to the field of electronics, aircraft navigation, and even aero-space. Machinery, equipment, engineering and supervisory support were secured at great costs. Contracts were obtained from leading corporations. The disabled were trained in a wide range of skills. At one point almost 200 trainees were involved in the production of aircraft instruments, computerized data control systems, and community television antenna systems. Through incentive systems and bonuses, the earnings of many production workers

far exceeded the New York State minimum wage standards. Many of these disabled workers found their way into similar jobs in private industry.

In the late 1960's the effects of automation, the use of foreign facilities and movement of manufacturers out of large urban centers were discernible. By 1973, as a result of severe cutbacks in job contracts, the training potential of the electronic workshop was sharply curtailed. Certain skills were no longer offered and the electronic training school was closed.

Workshop directors are thus caught in an unbroken cycle. They are captives to the needs of private industry in the area. At times they find themselves competing with other agencies for a contract. Despite the complexities of the labor force available, they are expected to be economically self-sustaining and to produce as efficiently as industry. As suggested by Milton Cohen (1967) the workshop director has the almost impossible task of "duplicating industrial conditions while simultaneously being committed to present a therapeutic community for the multi-handicapped." As a result of the changing industrial scene, even the limited equipment available in most workshops is already antiquated and obsolescent and the financial resources for retooling are extremely limited.

What also happens is that the real productive capabilities of many of the workshop clients cannot be truly assessed. All he can do is what the shop offers and workshop directors are often not providing conditions that stimulate the most

promising individuals to return to and succeed in industry." (Cohen, 1967).

The point here is not to demean the kind of work presently offered in the shops. For many, in various disability categories, the workshop provides them the only opportunity for gainful employment, some economic independence and confidence in self. The question is whether the workshops as presently conceived and structured can realize the very high demands that rehabilitation philosophies have placed on them. The degree to which the potential becomes reality depends in large measure on whether the workshops can overcome a twenty year lag in its industrial image.

We cannot offer meaningful vocational services to the handicapped and disabled in settings that do not reflect the vast technological changes in the world about us and truly mirror the way people earn their living. The proportion of workers required to provide services is steadily increasing. Much of the nation's economic output and growth evolves from the giant strides in the computerization of industry and business services, the creation of new material such as plastics, wonder drugs, the miniturization of electronic components, and the remarkable advances in the field of medical electronics. In the long run the full impact of these technological processes on society is "its capacity to render redundant the physical energies of man...i.e., machines do man's work for him, thereby freeing him from the bonds of toil." (Heilbroner, 1967).

But if mankind is being freed from the "bonds of toil", how then do we institute changes so that the handicapped may similarly be freed? To put the matter another way, should not those suffering severe limitations in physical capabilities be offered the advantages of work styles compatible with scientific and technological change?

What is needed is a unified and coordinated effort which, through intense research and careful planning may lead us to a model workshop of the future. Radical change is required because we are not addressing ourselves to problems that can be solved simply by making minor adjustments or by purchasing a new piece of equipment. Single workshops lack the resources and capabilities for coping with a situation grown to such dimensions and affecting all agencies. Attention to concerns of this magnitude can hardly be forthcoming from harrassed directors caught in the dilemna between "profits and people".

How then may we envisage a model workshop of the future? What follows is not offered as a plan. It is suggested as one guide for further discussion. The incorporation of technology into the mechanism of the industrial system has resulted not only in new processes of production, but concommitantly new forms of economic and managerial inter-connections, new social structures of control, and growing government participation and intervention. In like manner, a conglomerate effort consisting of a national coordinating center such as IARF, combined with workshops, industry and

government is required to research and possibly initiate a projection of this order.

Why not begin with the computer, traditionally understood as the ultimate villain in labor displacement? A computer facility established in any central area would provide wide new sources for evaluation, training and work. Job classifications would include programming, data processing, equipment maintenance, taping for industrial automatic machinery, keypunch and the use of a wide array of equipment related to accounting and office services. Bookkeeping that now cost rehabilitation agencies thousands of dollars annually would be readily available to facility administrators. The center would also act as a major research component for storing and processing information relating to the agencies, clients, and industrial needs.

The idea of a conglomerate should not be seen as a new bureaucratic institution dominating the scene, and, as happens in private industry, eventually eliminating the smaller shops. A computer and automated business service center that is suggested here would train clients for sister agencies, and establish a chain of supportive tasks that could be performed in other communities. Programming can be done through telephone lines, key punching for the central machines accomplished by small neighborhood shops or the homebound.

Other technical processes that offer similar possibilities of centralization and decentralization include:

1. Micro-filming: filming, processing, storing and

retrieving case histories, records, proceeds, literature and papers.

2. Centers for repair, service and maintenance of electrical and mechanical small appliances for home, hobby and industrial use.
3. Automated machinery for production of miniature electronic components and assembly of circuitry devices.
4. Production and maintenance of medical electronic equipment.
5. Plastic, extrusion and molding.
6. Precision testing laboratories for electronic, environmental and mechanical measurements.

These are but a few of the many possibilities that exist and may become part of the workshops of the future. However, certain cautions are relevant to this concept.

1. The projects described should not replace desirable and much needed work tasks now available to workshops. They will supplement rather than replace work now at hand.
2. It will be assumed that tasks demanding higher skills will automatically eliminate the sub-marginal producing and more severely disabled client. Will we not be turning our efforts and attention away from those most in need of services and concentrating on an "elite" group?

The more capable in our potential work force will

probably prove fully competent in areas requiring a higher level of mental competency and physical coordination. But clients subsumed under the heading "less efficient" "poor producers" "malcontents" and "mentally retarded" are often reacting to the very limitations of present facilities which serve to lower their motivation. As interest wanes, they are labelled as minimally competent, sometimes as deviant and untrainable. On the other hand, in a shop where they may visually perceive higher order skills, clients may internalize these perceptions into aspirations for upward mobility, wishing to be more a part of the world around them. Status and higher pay are the rewards for "this kind of work". The untrainable may prove to be an efficient competitive worker.

3. Are we embarking on a program of competition with private industry? In our quest for contracts we are in daily competition with small private shops, big business, or worse yet, with each other. We are here investigating means to reduce and eliminate competition and induce greater cooperation among the agencies and with private enterprise.

Are we projecting an impossible dream? The first federally enacted legislation that opened the doors to programs assisting disabled workers to develop skills for jobs was passed in 1917. (Switzer, 1969). It is hardly possible that the

visionaries of that time foresaw workshops in rehabilitation agencies looking very much like small factories, offering remunerative work in electronics, typing, blister packaging, tooling, or wood work. In fifty-six years we have passed through momentous changes. "Despite its advanced age, as social welfare programs go, the Vocational Rehabilitation movement in the United States refused to slow down and live on its past". (Haber and Rusalem, 1969). The latest in the progression of changes and improvements was the adoption of an amendment to the Wagner O'Day Act, offering government contract "set aside" opportunities to the shops servicing the blind and other handicapped.

But legislation is basically an enabling procedure. The task of overcoming the lag in the industrial image of the workshop can only be achieved through the concerted and unified effort of the highly competent and vigorous leadership of Rehabilitation Practitioners. Changes may be deemed inevitable. But the direction of those changes must be such that the disabled may realize their full potential in a rapidly changing economic and social order.

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